

JULIE HEFFERNAN

Self Portrait as Great Scout Leader III, 2010
Oil on canvas, 72 x 54 in



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RYAN MASTERS

Irredeemable, Now and Forever

I sat on a pile of back-dirt beside our unit and poured a handful of fish vertebrae into a plastic Ziploc baggie. We'd been working alongside this stretch of Interstate 80 for over four weeks now. It was a broad bench of sage and sand at Milepost 282, about halfway between Elko and Battle Mountain. Beyond the highway, the Humboldt River flowed by like a sluggish, alkaline snake. It was June in the northern Great Basin. Everything moved like it was half asleep. The cars, trucks, and RVs droned by on arrow-straight trajectories towards Utah or California.

I watched the highway while I worked, willing someone to stop and break the monotony of the day, if only to remind me that I wasn't just digging slow, careful, square holes in the desert. Yesterday, a westbound Winnebago had pulled over and discharged a pair of ancient Good Sam Club members. They'd wobbled up through the lunar landscape like astronauts, asked a few questions, even taken a few pictures. When nothing was found in twenty minutes, they got bored and hot and left.

I took the black Sharpie pen out of my mouth and wrote "Milepost 282/I-80 - Unit 4-Quad C-Level 8 [90 cm] - Fish Vert. [17] - 06/02/94 - DH" on a clear plastic baggie. Behind me, Susan troweled the last of our dirt through a screen balanced on her lap, then violently shook it back and forth a few times like she was trying to tilt a pinball machine. As the fine clay fell through the mesh and piled at her feet, she scanned what remained in her screen with a vacant intensity. I was going to have to switch back to the screen soon. I was in no hurry to mash and shake and mash some more. It was tiring and dusty and it hurt your back, and the screen's handles were sharp edges that rubbed the web between thumb and forefinger raw, even with gloves. It was almost always better to dig.

I poured the vertebrae, which look like deflated little bone soufflés, back out of the baggie and began recounting them. I was taking my time. The floor of my current quad was perfectly flat at a depth of ninety centimeters. I'd been shaving it down since lunch with more care and precision than I shaved my own face. Using my knife-sharp trowel, I'd slice a millimeter off here and there, then remeasure every inch of the square meter using a dirt-clogged tape measure, a level, and string as guides.

Susan and I had now completed eight ten-centimeter levels in three out of four of our unit's quadrants and

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found nothing but vertebrae, which, to my mind, was the equivalent of jack shit. Granted, the absurdity of digging a perfectly cubic pit in the desert always provided some grim consolation.

By one o'clock, I'd checked and rechecked the floor's plane so many times it had become too much work avoiding more work. So I recounted vertebrae with exquisite care and thought about water. I hadn't brought any. Two full water bottles sat right where I'd left them that morning beside my motel sink. It was bad form to be bumming water at work—we were in the desert, after all—but I wasn't overly concerned with my form. Form is for ice skaters and high divers, neither of which spent much time in the desert. It was kiln-oven-hot here. At midday in June, the world shimmered. I was constantly thirsty. I rarely pissed. I spent long, spacey periods of time thinking about nothing. I frequently felt very stoned in the desert. Of course, I frequently did get very stoned in the desert.

Luckily, Susan always brought a huge Igloo water cooler. She was a conscientious group leader. I praised her foresight every time I wandered over and filled a fresh paper cone, which was roughly every fifteen minutes or so. I also took great satisfaction in crushing the clean, crisp cones in my fist. Why? I don't know. It's the simple pleasures in the desert. Unfortunately, my water consumption was raising eyebrows. Regardless of the fact that we were alongside one of the biggest interstates in the United States of America, certain members of the crew liked to act as if we could find ourselves stumbling blind and lost across an alkali flat at any moment.

But water has an immense amount of power over both the mind and the body in the desert. Unlike the gurgling

slave that gushes forth from your bathroom tap, desert water has power. Historically, it has regulated us, not the other way around. As God in the Great Basin, it has always cruelly defined subsistence patterns. Its absence prevented and still prevents permanent occupation of vast areas of Nevada. The Paiute and Shoshone were forced to hunker down next to scant trickles that flowed for only a handful of miles before disappearing into alkaline sands. Sure, you could find rainfall way up in the mountains, but for most of the year it was too cold, and there was even less to eat there than on the desert floor. The Great Basin squats in a massive rain shadow cast by the Sierra Nevada, the highest range in the continental United States. In some areas, average annual precipitation is less than ten inches, and that ain't much. Water. Life. Vice versa. Lest we forget. And, of course, we do.

Susan rested the screen on a thigh, took off a glove, and pinched something tiny out of her screen with a thumb and forefinger. With her leg raised to support the screen, she looked like a high-stepping majorette with bad posture.

I waited.

"Nnnn-ope," she said, flicking it aside and putting her glove back on. From cultural artifact to grain of sand in a sea of sand grains. Just like that.

"What'd you think it was?" I asked.

"Mm. I don't know." She shook the screen back and forth a few times before resuming her clump crushing. "Charcoal fleck. Still hoping for a hearth."

Susan, along with the other group leader and the crew boss himself, was convinced we were on a fish camp. We were finding a ton of fish vertebrae and a few tools. It was a prime location. The site was on a nice bench a few hundred yards above the muddy waters of the Humboldt. Plus, this was one of the few level spots above prehistoric water levels for a few miles in either direction. But significant evidence was hard to come by. A camp like this was probably only inhabited during high-water years. Despite being one of the precious few perennial rivers in northern Nevada, the Humboldt contained poisonous concentrations of alkali during dry years, which were most years. Regardless, as northern Humboldt River sites went, this was still Club Med.

The Humboldt had been the route of choice for the mountain men, the Golden Army, the Pony Express, and

then the telegraph and railroad after them. And, of course, as an ultimate testament to the site's desirability, the interstate passes it today. In fact, the bench we were excavating was such an attractive location to humankind in general that the Department of Transportation was going to bestow upon it her finest honor: a rest-area-hood. Off-ramp and all. Which explained our presence.

The Historical Rights and Reclamation Act, enacted in the tolerant seventies, required that any development, private or public, had to be surveyed for "cultural resources" by a third party. So DOT had cleared the acquisition with the Bureau of Land Management, who had subcontracted the private cultural resource management firm I worked for.

Phase I survey had revealed a high concentration of obsidian debitage, the waste material of tool manufacture, on the area's surface. This necessitated a few square-meter test probes, which had coughed up an assemblage of bifaces and more debitage, suggesting significant blade or projectile-point production. This set the DOT's timetable way back, as it required a Phase III operation, which meant a full-scale excavation of the site. This news had not been received well by the people in charge of building the rest area. Despite the fact that a site of Milepost 282's size was going to take most of the summer to excavate, three backhoes had been parked in a turnout a half-mile up the highway since May, their operators poised to demo the bench as soon as our crew leader, Gary Larou, gave the go-ahead.

Cultural resource management was a lot different than academic archaeology. Academic archaeology is purely about data. CRM is primarily about time, and thus about money. It was a difference I was still getting used to. This was only my second season with the firm. Thirteen dollars an hour made it easier to justify this shift in archaeological values; I had student loans to pay off, after all. Still, it surprised me that a rest area could be such a high priority. It's not cheap to park a backhoe for weeks on end. But like I said, I was getting paid, so I didn't ask any questions. I was happy to have the job.

To the north of the site, a treacherous shale pitch climbed straight up a hundred feet or so to a plateau that overlooked the river basin. I'd scrambled up it one day during lunch and found myself standing beside power lines and a service road. From up there, the landscape was a

rhythmic spell. On one side, the gentle spine of the Independence Mountains; on the other, a wide, hypnotic sea of undulating basins and ranges. Directly below, our archaeological site resembled a crossword puzzle of yellow twine. It wasn't a huge stretch of the imagination to picture a fish camp down on that nice, level spot. In fact, if you ignored the fluorescent yellow grid, the crew could be a small band of Shoshone catching, cleaning, and smoking suckerfish, chub, and trout. Or alternately, with the grid and a little imagination, the crew could be fish caught in a yellow net or pawns rioting across a crumbling checkerboard.

To the silent west, the interstate stretched out like a dry, gray tongue. Upon it, cars and RVs, semi trucks and fifth wheel trailers hummed like tired wasps before disappearing east through the Carlin Tunnel, one of only three tunnels in the whole state. Beyond the highway, the river did its lugubrious thing. On a map of Nevada, the Humboldt travels east to west for a couple hundred miles from its source at the northern tip of the East Humboldt Range before suddenly plummeting south for another hundred, growing milkier with alkali as it goes. When Mark Twain tried drinking its water he reported, "Like drinking lye, and not weak lye either." At its tail end, the river limps along with the consistency of gruel and the temperature of blood. There is no outlet to the ocean. It simply disappears into the sand at what's known as the Humboldt Sink. The last-discovered of the American rivers, it flowed through the heart of what was once known as the "Northern Mystery," a great emptiness mapmakers had been filling with fanciful streams and lakes in an effort to coax foolhardy pioneers west. It wasn't even explored by white men until fur lured Peter Skene Ogden into the area in 1828. Having no idea where the Humboldt started or ended, he referred to it in his journal only as "Unknown River." The almost complete lack of water, the brutal climate, and an increasingly hostile Paiute and Shoshone reception kept exploration to a minimum for the next twenty years, but when gold was discovered in California, the Northern Mystery ceased being a mystery. Within a year, John Fremont had named and mapped the river, and a constant flow of prospectors and pioneers began using the Humboldt as a guide to the California gold fields. In 1869, the central section of the Transcontinental Railroad was built alongside the river, and a half-century

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later, the valley of the river became the route for U.S. Highway 40, which became Interstate 80. Today, most of northern Nevada's population lives in or near the river's valley. Most everything beyond is considered a wasteland. Even John Muir once called the Great Basin "irredeemable, now and forever."

Voilà. The white man's two-minute history of the Humboldt River. Of course, as archaeologists, we were trying to shed a little light on the *other* history of the Humboldt River. As I said, the fish camp theory was strong. We had some evidence of tool manufacture and a bunch of fish vertebrae, but we hadn't come across anything we could date. We were hoping to find a hearth, the remains of some old fire, any form of man-made charcoal to carbon test. A radiocarbon date was vital to making Milepost 282 significant. We pored over our units and screens, seeking even the tiniest fleck of charred wood or bone with sun-blistered intensity. The fact of the matter is that archaeology in the Great Basin isn't pyramids, tombs, and golden artifacts. It's tiny slivers of animal bone and obsidian or barely recognizable hunks of fire-cracked rock. It's smudges of ash, basalt cores, and fossilized feces. At best, it's a projectile point, a chert knife, a hearth, the odd petroglyph, or maybe a bit of cord.

To make matters worse, much of the Great Basin in northern Nevada was sparsely settled, and most site occupation was seasonal. We all knew we might be digging thirty yards too far to the north or the south or the east or the west, or perhaps we weren't deep enough, or the Humboldt had swollen over its banks one year and swept it all away, or a mudslide had, or a thousand and one other possibilities. Field archaeology is a geoscience of inference; after that, a pseudoscience of dumb luck. And considering that a site's basically just a grid of relatively random squares, field archaeology is a hell of a lot like Bingo. A really unfair game of Bingo.

"Oh my god!" Halter Top shouted. Because she'd found something. "Oh my god!" she shouted again, even louder. The screens stopped shaking and the trowels quit scraping while everyone glanced over at her in mild surprise.

Whatever it was, I immediately wished it had been in my quad. Unless it was a scorpion. If it was a scorpion, I wanted nothing to do with it. Or a brown recluse. She could keep that too.

Halter Top, an attractive girl who, to the female portion of the crew's irritation and my deep gratitude, insisted on wearing a breathtaking black halter top to work, clambered out of the quad, stumbling over and snapping the bright yellow twine which delineated the quads. If that wasn't enough, she dragged a shovel out after her, rending a huge gash in the south sidewall.

"Russ! Russ! Come here!" She yelled across the site, which was ridiculous as her group leader, Susan, was standing beside me just a few meters away. Apparently only Russ's roguish good looks and side-buttoned outback hat, not to mention his golden thighs and forearms, would do. I immediately cursed Russ. He was obviously balling her. I'd have to make a few adjustments to my morning aubade in the motel's shower. It would not do to have Russ making unannounced appearances during the hallowed two minutes of soapy friction that constituted my sex life.

Susan carefully laid her screen down, muttering something beneath her breath about a "goddamn shovel." In the neighboring unit the day before, a nice chert biface had been found in situ at roughly the same depth, about 120 centimeters. The point being, a shovel isn't exactly your first choice for precision work, especially at a depth that's been coughing up significant artifacts.

Most of the crew followed Susan's example. They dropped what they were doing, leaving trowels in their quads and laying down screens still filled with dirt, to investigate. Russ of the tanned limbs and smartly trimmed beard had to hustle to beat the riffraff over to her quad.

Eventually, I poured the vertebrae back into the baggie, dropped it on the ground next to our quad, and wandered over with a carefully crafted look of disinterest.

"Please, everyone!" Russ cried, taking over the situation despite the fact that he had no business being in Susan's unit. "Watch the sidewalls, please. Not too close!" A few overzealous crew members were knocking dirt back into the unit and re-covering whatever lay exposed on the quad's floor.

"Rebecca, could you take a few steps back? Please." Russ gently pushed Halter Top away from her quad. It occurred to me that referring to a potential mate by her name rather than the boob sling she was wearing was probably a pretty good gambit.

To my astonishment, I realized that Rebecca, standing

at the periphery now, was sobbing. Maybe she'd finally realized Russ found archaeology more interesting than her halter top.

I slipped into the front row and hunched down beside Susan. She absentmindedly fingered the plastic compass hanging around her neck and studied the girl's quad.

"Boy oh boy oh boy," she mumbled, shaking her head.

Before I could see whatever Rebecca had been unearthing with her big-ass, clumsy shovel, Russ stepped gingerly into the quad, whisk broom and trowel in hand.

"Russ. Russell!" Susan said. "What are you doing? Don't touch anything. Let's wait for Gary."

Russ ignored her and began brushing the floor of the quad. All I could see was the bastard's back.

"I'm serious. Get out."

"Let me collect the fragments."

The crew members on the other side of the quad were surprisingly silent, staring down with a mixture of solemn bafflement at whatever Russ was excavating. Someone noted, "Whatever it is, she broke it," and a few people nodded or shook their heads in grave agreement. A woman put a hand to her mouth and turned away from the quad. I couldn't tell if she was disgusted by Rebecca's clumsy excavation or by what she'd excavated.

It was too much for me. "What is it?"

I was ignored. They were transfixed.

Susan stood up and looked around for Gary. She was a big woman, maybe bigger than was good for her, health-wise, but deceptively strong. I'd seen her heft two five-gallon buckets of rock without any visible sign of strain. She was easily strong enough to drag Russ out of the quad if she wished, but Susan was a good field tech. She did things like they were taught, and she wasn't about to destroy sidewalls and tamp down the floor of a quad just to extract some jackass with a Leakey complex.

She finally spotted Gary standing with one of the backhoe operators down by the highway. They were both laughing about something and looking out across the interstate at the Humboldt River.

"Hutch, go get Gary for me, would you?"

I hesitated for a moment, desperate to see what was in the quad.

"It'll still be here when you get back. I promise."

"Fuck," I said.

"Thanks." She turned around and commenced crowd control.

I began zigzagging down through the sage at an undignified trotting walk.

Gary Larou wasn't your normal archaeologist. In fact, he wasn't particularly normal in the regular social sense at all. He was a whiskey-drinking, leathery, knife-wearing, ex-con-looking product of the Vietnam conflict who'd married a Cambodian Christian and been henpecked into taking advantage of the G.I. Bill. After reviewing his options, he'd found that his love of wandering through the desert looking for arrowheads and sipping from a *semper fi* flask could make him some money, get his wife off his back, and preserve his self-dignity to boot.

Of course, some of this I infer. He rarely spoke to us about anything other than the job. I got the impression he viewed all the men on his crew as soft, middle-class whiners, and he saw the females as soft, middle-class whiners who secretly wanted to fuck a real, living, breathing marine who was simultaneously profound as the water table and fantastically endowed. Again, I infer.

But that isn't to say he wasn't intelligent. He may have waved his redneck "Let God Sort 'Em Out" squadron flag around to keep everyone at a respectful distance, but he wasn't dumb. Far from it. He could tell you which side of these long axial Nevada ranges had water sources and which one drained right off into thick alluvial deposits to disappear forever. He knew where most of the streams that originated in the highlands of northern Nevada and southern Idaho traversed the Columbia lava plateau to feed the Snake River. In fact, he could tell you almost everything about water sources and their drainage in northern Ne-

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Follow the water
to the culture.*

vada. Water was the all. Water was the map. Follow the water to the culture. These were things he liked to say.

Gary noticed me jogging down through the sage before I reached him. Smiling, he slapped the backhoe operator on the back and began walking up the bench to meet me.

“Whatta we got?” Gary said, tipping the brim of his hat back and squinting up at me through one eye. I don’t think he knew my name at that point. Gary wasn’t the kind of guy who remembered names. Especially the names of twenty-one-year-old screen monkeys.

“I don’t know, but we got something.” I silently cursed Susan for making me look like an idiot as I stopped, waited for him to pass, and then followed along back to the site.

“Don’t know, huh?” His voice trailed sarcasm like cigarette smoke over his shoulder as he hiked. “Animal, mineral, plant? Can you give me a clue?”

“Susan sent me down to get you before I got a chance to check it out. Russell’s cleaning it up.”

“Of course Russell’s cleaning it up. I bet it isn’t even in his unit, is it?”

“Nope.” Despite myself, I occasionally liked Gary, but I knew the feeling would pass momentarily. He had a personality like a kiddie pool, filled with occasional pockets of unpleasant warmth.

“Well, let’s see if he’s managed to fuck anything up yet,” he said, unwrapping a toothpick from his flannel shirt’s breast pocket, jabbing it in his mouth, and commencing to flip it around with his tongue like a baton.

As we approached the site, an erratic breeze picked up. The sand and dirt at our feet whirled and eddied. Tiny, twisting dust devils leapt out of our way and dizzily flew

headlong into the sagebrush. Gary reflexively put a hand on his hat as a few field techs parted to let him through.

“Well then, Russell? What’s the professional opinion, son?”

Russ stood up and twisted around to face Gary without moving his feet, his whisk broom and trowel clutched in his fists. “I can’t be sure, but—”

“Then get the hell outta the way so the rest of us can take a look. What’s wrong with her?” Gary asked, looking over at a sniffling Rebecca with what was either sincere concern or opportunistic interest. As a unit, the entire crew turned around and silently studied her, which, of course, sent her into hysterics. She stumbled a few meters into the sage with her head bowed and her arms folded tightly across her chest.

“Russell, why don’t you go see what’s bothering her.”

“But—”

“She’s your girlfriend, ain’t she?”

Russ remained in the pit for an indecisive moment, and I briefly wondered if Gary had gone too far, but then he clambered timidly out of the pit and walked out into the sage to talk to the caterwauling Rebecca of Halter Top Farm.

Gary stepped down into the adjacent quad and hunched over what looked like a giant, partially exposed egg. He stuck his hand out and Susan set a whisk broom in it. He brushed around the edge of the buried dome with short, expert flicks of the wrist. Russell had piled the shards broken off by the shovel in a little pile beside it. Gary picked one up and squinted at it. He dropped the fragment back into the pile and frowned.

“Fuck *me*,” is all he said.

And with those words, a powerful wind suddenly gusted through the site like some kind of ghost train, snapping tarps and blowing sand into our eyes. Everyone turned away from the wind and covered their faces like mourners at a funeral. There was a clatter of wood as someone’s screen blew over, spilling dirt to the ground.

“Who left their screen standing?” Susan demanded. Everyone shook their head and peered through fingers. Another, longer, gust of wind howled through the site, disseminating data and bagged artifacts into the arms of surrounding sagebrush.

“God DAMN it!” Gary yelled into the wind.

We all scattered, chasing artifact bags and paperwork as the wind blew them through the site.

I found my baggie of fish vertebrae fluttering violently in the pungent, sticky fingers of a sage branch. Luckily, all my paperwork had been securely fastened to my clipboard. Other than a minor landfill in my immaculately graded quad floor, Susan and I had fared well.

The wind showed no sign of letting up now. The gusts increased in frequency until the wind was constant. Susan yelled at me from Rebecca’s unit. She, Gary, and Russell were hunched around it. I hurried through the chaos of fluttering paper, plastic, and curses to reach her. The wind messed with my inner ear and pressurized my skull, and I felt a little off balance. Stumbling dizzily into some sagebrush as I approached, I overheard Gary telling Russell to pack up. We were going home. Susan motioned me to crouch down beside her so I could hear.

“Bring us a tarp and four rocks. Big ones.”

Nodding, I complied. With difficulty, the crew was hurriedly pouring their screen loads back into the buckets and stashing them down in their quads out of the wind. They weren’t even waiting for Russell to reach them with the order. Once one person started packing up, the crew’s momentum was unstoppable. By the time I’d ferried four big stones out of the desert and found a tarp, the crew was already loading screens into the equipment truck.

“Just hold on to that end. Don’t let it go,” Gary warned. The tarp bucked and flapped, its edges flapping wildly like feral wings. The sand stung our eyes as we struggled to pin its corners to the floor of Rebecca’s quad. It kept slipping free and writhing like some kind of tortured wraith bent on escape from the dark pit. It was like trying to hold down an epileptic shadow. The thing was alive. And by the looks on Gary’s and Susan’s faces, I could have sworn they were thinking the same thing.

Wind is not an uncommon element in the desert. It’s the current of a dry ocean, dispersing life. The patterns of water are unpredictable in the desert, at the mercy of countless disparate environmental factors. Water is fragile and ephemeral, congregating in random depressions for mere hours at a time. The wind ensures that seeds are scattered in the short time it takes desert puddles to appear and evaporate. It ensures that roots and grasses sprout, that desert flowers bloom and die ecstatically like fireworks. To do

this, it must be remarkably *thorough*, and to be thorough, desert wind has to be relentless while it works.

This wind was so fucking relentless that it was genuinely frightening. After Susan set the last stone onto the tarp’s corner, the three of us backed off to see whether it was just going to shrug them off and take flight. But it held, only because the unit was more than a meter deep.

“Let’s go!” Gary yelled over the wind, pointing down towards the interstate. Even behind sunglasses, my eyes leaked like ruptured water mains in a vain effort to rid themselves of the grit. The traffic on the interstate had slowed considerably and turned on their lights. The sky grew darker.

Most of the crew had scrambled into the van and closed the doors and windows. It was rocking back and forth, even with over fifteen hundred pounds inside. Russ and a few others hauled the last loads of clanging shovels and rattling buckets down to the equipment trucks.

Susan scuttled over to our unit, low like a crab, and took a last look around. As I watched, the wind changed direction one hundred and eighty degrees, and back-dirt shot straight at us like a fire hose spewing buckshot.

Gary put a hand on my shoulder and pushed me towards the van. It was impossible to speak and even harder to hear. I started down towards the highway, my arms wrapped around my head to protect it from the earth’s sting. Susan and Gary were right behind me. Together, we stumbled blindly down to the vehicles. Gary jumped into the cab of the equipment truck and Susan and I jumped into the van, squeezing into the front passenger seat together. Russ was already behind the wheel.

The windstorm roared, strafing the side of the van with sand. The crew babbled excitedly behind me. I took off my sunglasses and cleaned the sand out of my eyes, smearing a gritty paste across my cheeks with the back of my hand. Someone tapped me on the shoulder with a box of Kleenex and I took it without turning around.

Someone in the back of the van said, “Gary’s trying to tell us something.”

We all twisted around in our seats to look back at the truck. Gary was waving the CB and four fingers in the air.

Susan and Russ grabbed up at the visor for the receiver at the same time. Susan beat him. Russ twisted the knob to channel four.

“Yeah, Gary. Over.”

The CB crackled and Gary’s voice came over the speaker. “Let’s take it home nice and slow. Make sure your lights are on, use your signals, and keep her in the slow lane. Over.” The sound of the wind over the CB was even eerier than the real thing.

“Roger. Over.”

“Nice and slow, now. Out.”

“Roger. Out.”

Susan clipped the receiver back to the visor.

“Nice and slow, Russell.”

Russ started the engine, turned on his blinker, waited for the equipment truck to pass, then pulled onto the highway behind it.

“Lights, Russell,” the CB squawked.

Russ snapped the lights on.

The drive back to the motel in Elko was surreal and apocalyptic. Just east of Carlin, a massive dust devil formed out in the desert, a swirling funnel of sand and dirt as tall as a five-story building that bobbed and tilted and bowed its great head while following along beside the highway before it collapsed into thin air. By the time we reached Elko, the sky was calm and blue and the air still as a grave.

* * *

The bar was the best thing about the motel. It suggested the motel had been a hot spot during the golden age of motels when people still went motoring, back when motels were still respectable, before they’d been dunked in a vat of sleaze and broken dreams by newspapers, fiction, TV, and movies. It was one of those places where you could identify three distinct eras. Its classic period was still evident in the room’s basic architecture—its vaulted sparkling ceilings and bi-level Bauhaus floor plan, the dark booths like gaping mouths, and the plush red double doors which hung cushioned and buttoned and heavy as raw lumber. I felt *hep* pushing through those babies, even if I was wearing cutoffs and sandals. The second layer of the room’s stratigraphy had been deposited in the seventies and early eighties: a huge, circular, rotating bar like a merry-go-round for drunks; banks of squawking slot machines; a disco ball over a peeling faux-wood dance floor; and a synthesizer on a tiny carpeted stage playing “Margaritaville” without any help from an actual musician. The final

and most stupefying layer of cultural evidence had arrived in the last decade: a cheap burgundy carpet that was as thin and mottled as bruised epidermis, wilting tits-and-beer posters, cheap chairs and tables that looked like they were folded up and put in a closet every night, soggy Budweiser coasters, and scarred black plastic ashtrays. A pretty nasty devolution. And like I said, this was the best part of the motel.

Susan was slowly revolving at the bar with Gary. It was a slightly nauseating optical illusion, and took a few drinks to get used to. As I stepped gingerly into the bar’s orbit, there was a big finish from the synthesizer onstage. Someone clapped. I said “what’s up” to a few of the other field techs scattered among the locals around the bar. It was the same scene every evening with mostly the same faces—exhausted shovel bums and Elko barflies who had assumedly been eighty-sixed from the rest of the town’s bars.

I squeezed in between Susan and some grayhair who looked like he’d been sleeping rough in the desert for half his life. Susan was listening to Gary. He had this peculiar way of peeling back his lips and talking through his teeth when he had a toothpick in his mouth. His hat was perched jauntily on the back of his head, and he was leaning heavily against the bar. He looked more than a little buzzed.

“These things need to be taken under consideration, so...” His “so” stretched out like taffy as he took the toothpick out of his mouth, looked down the bar at me, and nodded. “You gonna get something to drink?” This sounded almost like a challenge or a threat, so I caught the bartender’s eye.

It was getting louder in the bar now, and the synthesizer had launched into a mid-tempo “Que Sera, Sera.”

Gary stood up and motioned for us to follow him to a booth. We settled into it with our drinks. As Gary opened his mouth to speak, an incredibly spooky and high-pitched warbling interrupted him. “What the hell is this?” Gary demanded.

Standing a few humble steps behind the synthesizer like an accompanist, an old man played a long, crosscut whipsaw. Swaying in time to the music, he bent and held the quivering notes of “Que Sera, Sera” with his eyes closed. It was breathtakingly eerie and beautiful. Warped thunder. The entire bar fell silent while the saw began

to sing like lonely solar wind and crystalline light. It suggested melody across an endless vacuum. It was a sad, intergalactic lullaby. It very nearly moved me to tears.

When the last note wriggled out of the saw like a black eel and faded into silence, applause and yee-haws and fuck yeahs and what-have-you erupted from the sparse crowd. The synthesizer segued into “Forever in Blue Jeans.” Without so much as a bow, the saw player serenely set his instrument down and shuffled back to the bar.

“Jesus,” Gary said, finishing his beer with a yank in an attempt to seem either unaffected or annoyed.

“I didn’t know a saw could be so beautiful,” Susan said. “That was incredible. Like it was crying.”

“Anyway,” Gary said, clearly eager to stymie any and all saw talk. “What I wanted to say was, and before I say it I want it clear between the...”—he’d been talking directly across the table to Susan, but now he turned his attention to me, as well—“three of us that this just stays here among...” He paused again and looked back at me. “Now, I don’t know you too well...”

“Dougal... Hutchinson.”

“Doogle?”

“I was named after a Scottish mountain climber. He pioneered a route up the Eiger.” I could see Gary didn’t care. “Hutch is fine.”

“So this just stays here among us.” He paused again and looked at me. “You’ve worked for me before.”

“I was at Squaw Butte last year.”

“I seem to remember that.” Gary squinted at me and reached into his pocket for a new toothpick. “Aren’t you the guy that catalogued your fucking banana peel and threw a bunch of artifacts in the trash?”

“The bags were the same,” I blurted. “They were both brown paper bags. It was my first week.”

Gary laughed. It was a cruel laugh. “Well, we need a third for a little overtime job, and Susan here says you’re okay.” He gave Susan a look. “Right?”

“He’s okay.”

I was surprised to hear this. I’d always thought Susan considered me an idiot.

“Good. First thing, this stays between us three right here.” He waited for me to acknowledge this.

“What are we doing? Killing Russ?” I joked. They didn’t smile, so I blurted, “Sure. Right here between us.”

Gary squinted at me and reached into his pocket for a new toothpick. “Aren’t you the guy that catalogued your fucking banana peel and threw a bunch of artifacts in the trash?”

“Second thing, the least amount of questions from you, the better. This thing’s boo-coo down low. Just a little recon ride. Clear?”

We both nodded. Gary leaned back and gave me a good, long look. The toothpick swayed back and forth in his teeth like a tiny cobra ready to strike. Apparently satisfied, he slid out of the booth and left the bar without another word.

“What in the hell?”

Susan stirred her drink. I noticed she’d chewed her twin red straws into a pair of gnarled little tongues. “You’re not going to start asking a lot of questions now, are you?” she asked.

“It crossed my mind.”

“I’ll give you three.”

With every bump and depression in the road, the tags jingled, and the excavation screens rattled nervously in the bed of the truck.

“Where are we going?”

“Back to the site.”

“To do what?”

“Take another look at Rebecca’s unit.”

I silently cursed myself for asking two questions I pretty much already knew the answers to. I thought carefully about the third question before asking it.

“Why all the secrecy?”

This time she took her time answering. “It’s a little complicated. The most straightforward answer I can give you is that there are certain members of the crew who might take issue with their exclusion from any aspect of the excavation.”

“You mean Russell.”

“Suffice it to say, Gary just wants to take a look at what we found in Rebecca’s unit without the whole crew looking over his shoulder.”

“I just don’t understand why you two need me along.”

“That’s just a cleverly disguised question.”

I shrugged and picked up my beer. “I’m just wondering why you need three people to go look at a unit. You don’t have to answer that. I’ll find out for myself soon, right?”

“Listen,” she sighed. “He trusts me and I trust you. You’re clearly a sharp guy and you obviously want to make a career of this.”

“Of course.” I guess I did.

“Well, you help Gary out on something like this....”

“A favor.”

“Sure. You do a favor for Gary, you might be surprised how things change. Who knows? Maybe next season you’re a group leader.”

“And you’re a crew leader?”

She turned in the booth and leaned back against the wall, her drink in her hand. “Question time is over.”

I noticed an old sepia photo above her head. A covered wagon, probably on the local section of the California Trail. A man and woman sat stiffly at the reins. The woman held something swaddled, presumably a baby, in her arms. The man held a rifle across his lap.

“So we clear?”

“Yeah, sure. We’re clear.” And we were. It usually took three or four seasons to even be considered for a group leader position. They made \$24 an hour. Plus, I’d already given my word to Gary. I was in, like it or not.

* * *

Gary drove his old F-150. Susan sat in the passenger seat with her eyes closed and appeared to be either deep in thought or semiconscious. I sat bitch, uncomfortably squeezed between the two. As he drove, Gary slurped hot coffee, peeling back his lips and sighing after every sip. He still looked pretty drunk. No one spoke. Johnny Cash warbled on the tape deck. Dog tags, a black POW/MIA kerchief, and some unidentifiable object that looked like dried flesh hung from the rearview mirror. With every bump and depression in the road, the tags jingled, and the excavation screens rattled nervously in the bed of the truck.

The headlights lit a pitifully small area of the highway ahead. The dashes of the median line strobed by hypnotically. Beyond the influence of our headlights, it looked as if someone had poured a bucket of black pitch over the rest of the world. It was a night’s night. No moon.

I began to experience irrational fears inspired by Gary and Susan’s silence. I half-convincing myself they were taking me out into the desert to discharge some unspeakably violent and deeply personal grudges against me. A quarter-mile ahead, a semi truck’s headlights atomized a pitifully small section of night sky before exploding over the lip of a slight grade like two spotlights.

“Brights, asshole,” Gary mumbled, flashing his own.

I watched the long hauler roar by, the driver’s face invisible high in its stegosaurus cab.

“These your dog tags?” I asked, reaching up to finger them.

“Don’t touch those.”

I reflexively yanked my hand back. Gary continued to slurp his coffee for a while, then said, “Those are my tags. That’s my flag. And these,” he set his coffee between his legs and gingerly cupped the fleshy object with his hand, “are goat balls.”

I squinted through the dim light of the cabin and recognized that, indeed, he had a pair of desiccated balls hanging from his rearview mirror. Lovely. Susan snickered in the darkness beside me, her eyes still closed.

“Bet you’re wondering what I’m doing with a pair of goat balls hanging in my truck,” he said with another slurp of coffee.

“Now I am.”

“Juju.”

“Ah,” I said.

“All three of them things. The tags, the flag, the balls. That’s my juju.”

“Where’d you get them?”

“The balls? I cut ’em off a goat in Ong Thanh, 1967. Hung ’em around my neck for three tours. They got the power to make me invisible at night.”

“That’s some serious juju,” I said cautiously.

Gary nodded solemnly. “Fuckin’ A.”

We passed through the Carlin Tunnel and the lights illuminated the balls. They swung malevolently a foot or so from my face. My stomach turned and I felt afraid.

A few minutes later, Gary slowed down and parked on the shoulder below the site. He killed the engine and shut off the headlights, dousing us in black. “Two flashlights under the seat.”

Susan opened the door and the cab’s dirty yellow dome light flickered on, casting her slack, tired face in its jaundiced light. She reached down and retrieved the flashlights. Night pushed in on the little cab, making me feel as if the windows were about to crack, the metal ready to buckle.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Get out of the truck.”

“Got it.”

I followed Susan out of the cab, went to the back of the truck, and dropped the tailgate to drag out a screen. I could hear the river on the far side of the highway, which was funny because I never heard the river during the day. The dark had amplified it. Susan handed me the flashlights and then dragged two shovels out of the bed with a clatter. I stuck one flashlight in the waistband of my pants, put the other beneath my arm, and began to pull a screen out of the bed of the truck.

“No screen,” Susan said. “Just grab some of those Hefty bags. The big black ones.”

I did as I was told.

“Turn on the flashlight,” Susan said. “You lead.”

Winding my way up to the site through a maze of sage, I kept the flashlight’s beam focused at my feet so Susan could see where she was going behind me. When we were halfway up to the site, I heard the truck’s door slam. I glanced back, but all was dark. Gary apparently didn’t need a flashlight. Or maybe he was wearing his goat balls and they also allowed him to see at night. Susan was breathing hard, her eyes trained on the halo of light around my feet.

When we reached the site, I carefully skirted around it to reach Rebecca’s unit. Susan dropped the shovels into the sand and caught her breath in the dark. I set the flashlight in the dirt next to her, took the second one out of the waistband of my pants, and turned it on. I experimentally trained its beam on the sage around us. It barely penetrated the dense black. A coyote howled from somewhere up on the plateau above the river basin. Its single, wailing note fell like a star through the night just as Gary slipped out of the black, dropping his backpack beside the quad.

“Listen to that bitch howl,” Gary whispered.

“How do you know it’s female?” Susan asked, fatigue and irritation in her voice.

“The bitch howls like that, pretends she’s in heat to lure any wild dogs in the area. Horny dog comes trotting out thinking it’s gonna get laid. Instead of a little bitch, he finds the rest of the pack waiting to rip him apart.”

“Nice,” I said, deeply disturbed by this image. I imagined some ghostly woman moaning in orgasm out in the desert while a dozen things with teeth hunkered down in

JULIE HEFFERNAN

Self Portrait as Emergency Shipwright, 2013

Oil on canvas, 60 x 84 in



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, GALERIE MICHAEL HAAS, BERLIN AND P.P.O.W. GALLERY, NEW YORK

the sage, waiting for me to follow my erection out into the killing field.

“Okay. This is how we’re going to work,” Gary said. “I dig this unit. Suse, you bag. And you...”

“Hutch.”

“You start digging meter-deep holes. All around this unit. Got it? You stop when you hit something, and start another.”

I’d really like to say I hadn’t seen it coming. Really, I would.

“All right, then. We’re gonna move quickly now. I don’t want to be here more than a couple hours.”

I reached down for one of the two shovels.

* * *

Gary and Susan were quiet and sullen as we picked our way back down to the truck from the site. What we left behind had little remaining archaeological value. It was just a bunch of holes in the desert—another incident of looting to be blamed on yahoos from Elko who had got wind of arrowheads being found out at Milepost 282.

“You know why we got our butts kicked in Vietnam?” Gary asked as he walked point through the sage.

I wasn’t going to touch that one, so I waited for him to continue.

“Knowledge of the terrain.”

“Hmmm...” I said.

“That and South Vietnamese double agents. Gooks in U.S.-Army-issue that were really playing for Ho Chi Minh. Backstabbing little fuckers.”

I didn’t like the implications of this history lesson. Not one bit. So I kept my mouth shut. The bones of at least five human beings rattled in the black Hefty bags I carried down the trail. They were surprisingly light.

Gary sighed. “But that’s what you get for letting bureaucrats run a war.”

Ryan Masters is a writer, journalist, and poet from Santa Cruz, California. His work has appeared in a wide range of publications such as *The Iowa Review*, *The Absinthe Literary Review*, *The Surfer’s Journal*, and *Scuba Diving* magazine. He holds an MFA from the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, and was the poet-in-residence for the City of Pacific Grove from 2002-2004. Read more @ryanmasters831.